

» » OPPORTUNITY

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As we have therefore OPPORTUNITY let us do good unto all men. . . . —Galatians 6:10

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CONTENTS

Cover — A Paul Parker photo of Allan Wilson, a member of the Scout Troop of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, New York City.

The Editor Says 98

A Rebuke to Reactionaries

If We Are to Go On

Down Under

In the Tradition of Daniel O'Connell

War on the Poll Tax Front—

By Robert E. Martin 100

Federal Housing Brings Residential Segregation to Buffalo—

By William L. Evans 106

Edit What You Read—

By S. Wycliffe Garlington 111

Negro Business and the National Crisis—

By Walter R. Chivers 113

The New Administrator of the Federal Works Agency—

By Charles S. Duke 116

Survey of the Month 118

New Books on Our Bookshelf 122

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BUFFALO is the "City of Good Neighbors." So we say. Its 47 nationalities gather here from the four corners of the earth—Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas. We make a cosmopolitan blend unlike most cities. The major elements cluster about their cultural centers, each preserving for itself, its customs and mores. The struggle for survival and the impact of the depression years have given us our problems, but they have been solved on a non-racial basis. With the upturn in employment, industry has re-hired, generally, its Negro workers. Trade unions have not always been friendly, neither have they been openly hostile to Negroes, as in most sections. Schools, colleges, churches, hospitals and relief organizations, and the social agencies rate well in their services to Negroes.

But—in housing, there is a different story. The area in which the majority of Negroes live has served the housing needs of each successive wave of migration from 1860 to now. Low rents have furnished the attraction to the near East Side which includes, roughly, the First, Fifth and Eighth Wards. But rents are not cheap here. On the contrary, they are the highest in the city measured by any standard. There are no Property Owners' Associations with anti-Negro residence covenants. Yet, since 1916 when the migration began, Negro renters have been rigidly confined to two rather well-defined areas. Beyond this the scant infiltration of Negro home buyers has raised no measurable protests. Yet there is objection to Negro neighbors no matter what their cultural and economic status may be.

Observable in the so-called Negro areas is the pattern of residence reflecting the process of urbanization common to any cosmopolitan city. Negroes, Jews, Italians, Poles and a few other miscellaneous groups, not only have lived without friction in the same city blocks and neighborhoods, but in the same houses. Into this setting comes slum clearance, and now defense housing demanding Negro segregation.

Public Housing

(1) The first approach to Buffalo's housing problem was through subsistence housing to be built in the outlying suburban areas. This failed utterly.

(2) Private interests were then consulted. After a rather comprehensive study, the conclusion was reached that "Standard housing for low income groups in slum or blighted areas could not be provided without subsidy."

(3) Early in 1932, the W.P.A. announced its slum clearance program. The East Side Housing Corporation, in cooperation with the Urban League, immediately prepared preliminary plans and applied for Federal aid. The site selected was the Clinton, William, Michigan and Pine Streets section in the heart of the Negro residential area. Option grabbing soon increased the

Federal Housing Brings Residential Segregation To Buffalo

● By WILLIAM L. EVANS

land costs to such prohibitive heights that the location was abandoned.

(4) W.P.A., having failed to get any cooperation from city officials in providing a site for a low rent housing project, built the Kenfield housing project in the northern suburbs of the city. The site was selected and construction started while politicians, the Buffalo Real Estate Board, City Planning Association, Chamber of Commerce and the Taxpayers' League opposed it on the fallacious theory that (a) public housing is interference with private business; (b) it would depreciate private property; (c) it would force taxpayers to pay additional taxes on real estate already over-taxed; (d) that it would support an indigent class in homes they could neither support nor pay for, and all the other well known stock-in-trade arguments against public housing.

Negro Segregation Policy

Meanwhile the Mayor of Buffalo refused to appoint a Municipal Housing Authority, even after the New York State Assembly finally passed the Enabling Act. This refusal led to the organization of the Advisory Committee on Tenant Selection, set up to operate Kenfield, an 800-unit project. Learning that Kenfield would be opened in the summer of 1937, the Urban League, having been informed that representatives from Washington had recommended that no Negroes be admitted to Kenfield, secured a conference with the Advisory Committee on Tenant Selection. Assurance was received that, "In so far as the Committee is concerned, there would be no racial segregation." Shortly after, however, the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA) was appointed and Negroes were ex-

choice from the Kenfield project with the preposterous explanation that "No Negroes living in sub-standard houses had applied for tenancy." The Urban League had registered 25 families to offset this excuse. This policy laid the foundation for the current controversy over a site for a Negro Defense Housing project.

A Negro Project (Willert Park Courts)

In June 1937, the BMHA announced its \$5,000,000 slum clearance program. Three projects—one in the Negro East Side area (Willert Park Courts), one in the Italian West Side area (Lake View), one in the Irish-Catholic area (Commodore Perry project) of the South side in the First Ward. The two latter sites were selected and construction started with opposition, headed by a Roman Catholic priest, to the Commodore Perry project. However, construction proceeded without serious interruption.

In the Negro area the situation was different. Three different sites were selected and abandoned for excessive land cost. Negro citizens, with substantial support from civic-minded individuals and groups, urged an equal number of units for their area as provided in the other two, namely Lake View (800 units) and Commodore Perry (900 units). The BMHA then announced that the project for Negroes would be 300 units. Protesting this as unfair based upon housing needs, the BMHA's chairman wrote the Urban League—"The Housing Authority originally had in mind a project of about 100 families. You will appreciate that we must take into consideration the need somewhat along the lines of percentage basis. We did increase the project to 172 units. The Authority recognizes that this does not solve the problem, yet we have gone greatly beyond the number of units that would have been built had we adhered strictly to a percentage rule."

Vigorously protesting this measure as not being applied to other racial and nationality elements, other explanations developed—as

(1) Unless some other agency provides residence for those who must be moved to make way for the new project, the Negro project (Willert Park Courts) can not be built at all.

(2) It is doubtful if 172 Negro families can qualify (of the 15,000 Negro population) because of their relief status and low incomes.



Willert Park Low Rent Housing Project.

(3) The BMHA has not said that Negroes would be barred from other projects.

By an arrangement with the Department of Social Welfare, the 40 families living on the Willert Park site, were moved to other locations without difficulty.

A study of 632 families in the area showed a median rent of \$18.60 per month plus utilities, which averaged nearly \$10 a month or a total of \$28.60. The rents scheduled for the Willert Park Courts ranged from \$18.50 for 3 rooms to \$22.50 for 5 rooms, utilities, except light, included. The project was opened in September 1939. In September 1941, there were 1,100 qualified Negro applicants waiting for places in the 172 units.

Further, white families applied for residence in the Jim-Crow project and Negroes applied in the two others. However, the segregation policy was rigidly held to in all instances. When asked why the BMHA had insisted upon its Jim Crow policy, it was stated that two well known Negroes had asked for "a project of our own." This stands against thousands of petitioners against segregation, signed by 55 Negro societies and organizations with a combined membership of not less than 5,000 persons.

Defense Housing—North Side (La Salle Courts)

In May 1941, the Division of Defense Housing at Washington, D. C., announced that they were "exploring the possibilities for allocating defense housing for North Buffalo." "We are aware," wrote one official, "that the plant expansion of Semet Solvay Company has resulted in Negro workers having to seek other dwellings. We are at present exploring the possibilities of assigning for colored occupancy the 200-unit



Aerial view of Willert Park Project, showing the ten units of construction and facing a small playground.

project now being constructed in North Buffalo under the Landham Act." (Courier-Express, May 7, 1941.) North Buffalo residents immediately protested.

The extension of Willert Park Courts was advocated by local congressmen and their associates as a diversion. A Negro Adviser to the Division of Defense Housing arrived here in June to quell the storm of protest which took on serious proportions. Learning of our local fight against racial segregation in public housing, and being challenged for recommending a 200-unit Negro project, the claim was made that a Jim Crow unit had not been recommended, but that 200 units be allocated to Negroes from the 1,000 proposed. However, there is nothing in the record to support this. The net results were that the North Buffalo project (La Salle Courts) excluded Negroes entirely, even though Washington had first stated their need as urgent.

Defense Housing—East Side (Cheektowaga)

Avoiding the North side protest, late in July 1941, Washington officials selected a site in Cheektowaga, just outside Buffalo, for the project. Immediately Polish priests and politicians raised a terrific howl against this location. Telegrams and petitions to Washington supported their protests. Polish Catholics, urged by their priests, held mass meetings and organized to make their objections effective. The Negro Adviser in Defense Housing, and other Washington officials, sought ineffectively to quiet the Polish protest. Early in August, Negroes held a mass meeting in Shiloh Baptist Church, and adopted the following resolution:

"That this body of citizens meeting on Monday, August 11, 1941, in protest over the action of certain white groups who have seen fit to protest against the selection of two sites to house Negro workers, that we petition the Mayor of the City of Buffalo, The Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority, the United States Housing Authority, its representatives and all concerned, to put an end to the practice of racial discrimination against all minority groups, and to focus their energies in direction of a national

unity which will preserve, with injury to none, the American ideals and institutions. That we immediately take appropriate action to secure for ourselves such remedies as may be provided by the Civil Rights Bill of New York State, and such other legal provisions as may serve to equate our position with others, and guarantee to us the full enjoyment of our rights and privileges as citizens of this commonwealth."

There were more visits from Washington advisers and agents. Finally a new site was selected. This time in South Buffalo.

Defense Housing—South Buffalo (Okell Street Site)

With the announcement of the Okell Street site, the real fight started. Councilmen, business men's associations, Catholic priests and their flocks denounced the proposed site as (1) Adversely affecting private property; (2) Defense housing not needed; (3) Additional housing for Negroes should be provided in their own area; (4) This is an invasion of property owners' rights; (5) This is undemocratic because we were not consulted on this location—etc., etc.

Buffalo's Democratic Mayor condemned the Okell Street site and called a special meeting of the Republican-controlled City Council for August 27, 1941. The Council chamber was filled to overflowing long before the proceedings began. On the night before, sound trucks and soap box orators had been used on South side residents to urge attendance. Catholic priests and politicians showed complete understanding and organization. The crowded Council chamber demonstrated when Monsignor Nash entered, by giving a standing ovation. Father Coughlin was received with a similar demonstration when he was given the floor to protest. The

Councilman for the South Park district presented the resolution, "The Common Council condemns Federal authorities in selecting the so-called Okell Street site in complete disregard for the opinions of citizens or their representatives." He added assurance "that the city will provide sufficient funds for the extension of Willert Park Courts." (This would keep Negroes where they now reside).

All spokesmen, except Monsignor Nash, denied they were motivated by any race prejudice, but as soon as a CIO Negro steel worker asserted his right as an American citizen to live anywhere he chose, he was booed vigorously. Here is a representative statement from a Councilman-at-large, "We want it known that we are against a housing project in South Buffalo. The people of South Buffalo are not against the colored folk, but they are solidly against a housing project." Two days later the FWA Administrator canceled the project.

Defense Housing—Three Other Sites:

- (1) Dold; (2) Broadway Auditorium;
- (3) Eagle-Fillmore

At the order of the City Council, the BMHA recommended three more sites. After a public hearing in which Negroes participated without organization or leadership, the city-owned Broadway Auditorium site was favored. South side was jubilant. Catholic Holy Family Church's Monsignor posed with politicians and business men for a "victory dinner" and had the picture published in the Buffalo Evening News. This drew such universal censure that the dinner was called off. For the third time the FWA canceled the site for the proposed Negro Defense housing project.

In rapid succession, the three sites recommended by the BMHA were protested, leaving Willert Park Court extension the only uncontested possibility. The Poles objected to the two other sites (Dold and Eagle - Fillmore) which are in the Negro-Polish area and contiguous to the Ne-

gro population which is moving eastward into the Polish area. This is a vast area and is expanding from its far eastern border. The Eagle-Fillmore site under dispute *now* is one of industrial blight, railroad yards and slums. The Broadway Auditorium site was protested by Broadway business men.

Behind the Scenes

Moving behind the scenes of public Council hearings, the mere mouthings of priests and politicians alike, and the consciousness publicity of the local press, ugly, naked politics and race prejudice were having a veritable Roman holiday. The fall elections were approaching. Republican Buffalo with its Democratic Mayor needed a sharp campaign issue. *Nationally Democratic Sponsored Defense Housing* was that issue. An Urban League committee headed by some of our most prominent civic leaders, held conferences with the BMHA, Erie County Republican and Democratic Committee Chairmen, and made these proposals:

1. That Defense housing involving the race issue, not enter the current campaign.
2. That they confer on a plan with the Urban League after election.
3. That they approve the position of the Urban League in not recommending any site, but concerning itself with the broader principle of *no segregation in public housing*.
4. That the FWA select a site and proceed, without racial designation in tenant selection, in keeping with the pattern of residence in that area.

These proposals were agreed to in principle by the County Chairmen. The BMHA disclaimed any responsibility for the current dispute and re-



Aerial view of the Commodore Perry Housing Project of 900 dwelling units. It has more than 60 separate units of construction, plus the central heating plant. This shows by comparison how small the Willert Park Project is.

fused to commit itself on policy. All agreed, however, that the site selection had resulted in political manipulation by the Republican City Council and the Democratic National Administration in Washington, with Negroes being the victims of an aroused race prejudice.

Revival

In November, 1941, the City Council applied to the New York State Division of Housing for financing the Willert Park Courts extension. The grant of \$1,116,362 was promptly made. In January, 1942, the following press statement appeared: "After months of waiting patiently for action by the Buffalo City Council in defense housing, the Federal authorities are bitterly disappointed to find the State's proposal to extend Willert Park has been summarily dismissed. The Federal government is now compelled to go ahead with its own program."

The Democratic Governor of New York State charged, in a letter to Buffalo's newly elected Democratic Mayor—"There can be no question now of the immediate and pressing urgency of providing adequate housing for defense workers in your city."

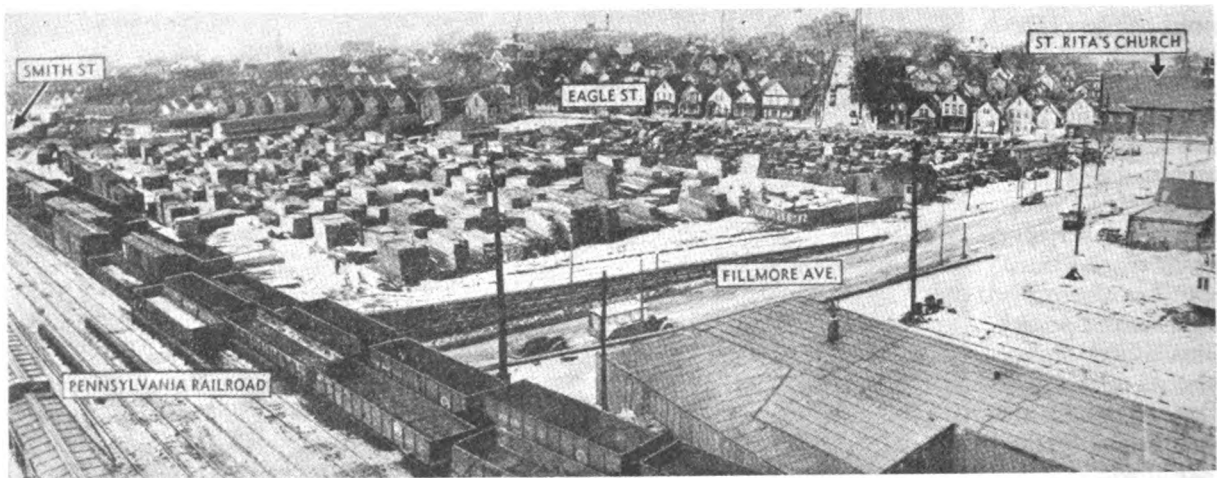
Two weeks later, the Fillmore-Eagle site was *again* selected by the Federal government for a 200-unit Negro defense housing project. Polish citizens promptly objected again to this most undesirable site situated as it is—bounded by the railroad tracks, live stock yards, packing plant, a tannery, and well on the periphery of the Polish area, but convenient to defense industries employing Negroes. Again protests have been sent to Washington and delegations have urged the City Council to proceed with the Willert Park extension and cancel the Eagle - Fillmore site.

On February 24, 1942, word from the FWA is "The project (Eagle-Fillmore) is definitely going ahead." One week later, Councilmen from the Polish district charged Democratic congressmen with being "parties to a political conspiracy to blackmail the municipal government of Buffalo into pledging the city's credit in any amount exceeding one million for construction of a defense housing project as the price of immunity against Federal invasion of law-abiding communities." Reference is made to the city using State funds for the expansion of Willert Park. (Buffalo Evening News, March 3, 1942.) The same issue states: "Buffalo's 200-unit Negro defense housing project is no further advanced than it was in mid-summer."

Other press reports from Washington indicate that again the USHA will abandon this site, and return to the Willert Park extension "in face of strong protests by irate residents of the section." This can mean only further delay and possible abandonment of the plan to relieve the housing needs for Negro workers.

The final chapter on the Buffalo Negro Defense Housing controversy can not yet be written. Currently it is complicated by the interplay of race prejudice, ignorance on both sides, inefficiency and bungling in local and Federal agencies. A new and self-seeking leadership has sprung up on the Negro side. These leaders apparently are unable to understand the issues involved. Their engaging in the public hearings has clearly demonstrated this. They seem to be unable to distinguish between slum clearance and defense housing — or State and Federal housing. They have concerned themselves with engineering and social problems entirely beyond them, and quite beside the issues, thus confusing

(Continued on Page 124)



Aerial view of the Fillmore-Eagle-Smith location, which was the last site under consideration and finally abandoned under protest of the Polish people living in the area. The area is composed of an auto junk yard, lumber yard, coal shed and eleven houses on the Eagle Street front—in poor condition—which could well be demolished.

payers' money through labyrinthine channels. Men who were formerly unknown built homes with gold toilet fixtures, dug private lakes, rode blooded horses, and named great public works after themselves. Among these were "Cajuns of a smiling amorality"; Italians with under-world backgrounds that failed to debar them from public honors; Jews whose wealth grew greater "by the process of special favors that speak all languages"; and bringing up the rear in great numbers—"plain Anglo-Saxon thieves." A Governor who had earned \$450,000 in three years on an annual salary of \$7,500, pointed out that he had not taken "any vows of poverty when he took the Gubernatorial oath." A complaint head of the State's conservation department confessed: "I would sign anything they stuck in front of me, except an order to hang me." A large contracting firm paid out more than \$500,000 in graft alone. Open prostitution of official position for private gains produced a lesser breed of public parasites, gamblers, slot-machine operators, and pin-ball magnates. All of this and more came to light when a Federal investigation disclosed an amazing group of political grafters, who, "not only stole big but stole little," while believing implicitly in the effectiveness of their time-tried admonition: ". . . no records, no accounting; always cash."

After the story of the Louisiana scandals had swept across the country, thinking people within the State began to compare the benefits of a dictatorship with its costs. They discovered that while receiving good roads, free text-books, more schools, a lowered rate of illiteracy, towering bridges, and the abolishment of poll-tax requirements, they were also being defrauded in many ways. Then a wave of indignation swept over the State, and overthrew the Long dynasty in the second primary of 1940.

Louisiana Hayride advances no solutions to the ills it describes in colorful words and racy, fast-moving narrative. It does not argue. But it would have been a post-Reconstruction document of greater importance had Mr. Kane confined his efforts to the 1898-1938 political period, instead of touching upon political corruption under the French and Spanish *régimes*. This is suggested because the Constitutional Convention of 1898, which disfranchised poor and illiterate Negroes with its Article 197, exempted the whites of these same classes through its "grandfather clause." This convention also marked the rise of Martin Behrman—and it was "Behrmanism" and the New Orleans "ring" that Long fought most vigorously. Even if the right to use colonial and *ante bellum* material be conceded, the omission of such names as John Slidell and Henry Clay Warmoth is debatable. The first—whose enemies nicknamed him "King John"—is said to have introduced machine politics into *ante bellum* Louisiana. The second, of Reconstruction notoriety, is generally acknowledged as the prime mover in many political villainies of his day.

Mr. Kane practically ignores that most sensitive spot—the status of a segregated minority in a theoretical democracy. At several points he seems ready to speak out in behalf of what is roughly one-third of the State's population, but each time refrains. His statement, "A Negro lieutenant-governor lolled about while drunken delegates shot dice in the legislative halls," does not

indicate a sympathetic attitude towards the Negro's political role in the Reconstruction drama.

Mr. Kane's account contains but scant mention of Negro activities during the second primary of 1940; their increasing hope that they be allowed to vote; their appeal to O. John Rogge; and Senator Ellender's waving of a New Orleans Negro publication on the floor of the United States Senate and his challenging of Rogge to extend the franchise to Louisiana Negroes. The subject of Negro-voting became so involved in political controversies that sworn affidavits of Negro editors became campaign documents, with each side charging the other with having brought in the Negro issue. The cartoon of "The Poor Innocent Negro," being struck to earth by the forces of the opposition, was published in the newspaper that still employs Mr. Kane.

Unconscious irony may be found in the account of the meeting of the Citizen's Committee at the new courthouse, where its members selected as the text of their speeches one of the high-flown inscriptions engraved upon the front and sides of the building: "*The Impartial Administration of Justice Is the Foundation of Liberty.*" Upon this same building are two bronze plaques depicting a Negro surrendering his gun to a white man, and placed there in commemoration of the White League Riot of 1874. One of them is just below the inscription, but the committee and Mr. Kane failed to comment upon the incongruity of the situation. A regrettable fact is that many reviewers of the book followed a similar pattern. They were so concerned with the idea that a type of dictatorship did happen here, and so interested in what that dictatorship had done to white people, that they forgot entirely what a questionable political usurpation—based upon color alone—has been doing to the Negroes of Louisiana since 1900.

—MARCUS B. CHRISTIAN

FEDERAL HOUSING BRINGS RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION TO BUFFALO

(Continued from Page 110)

the already difficult situation. The one thing that does seem clear to them is that they will resist any effort to confine Negroes to their present geographical area, which must expand in the only direction it can expand—into the so-called Polish section.

Apparently the Poles intend to resist this. Suggestions of violence are already in circulation—on both sides. Doubtless Negroes will move in, if and when the project is completed, whether the Poles object or not. Here we have a perfect example of local and Federal agencies, through inefficiency and political appeasement, setting the stage for possible riot and bloodshed, at a time when all citizens are being recruited to battle for the defense of democracy. Everything has been used—caste, class, religion and politics—to divide us.

No matter what happens now, Buffalo cannot soon return to its traditional inter-racial good will for all its citizens as implied in the current slogan—"The City of Good Neighbors."